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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the lexical content of four recently published textbooks for college-level introductory German is presented. The study investigated the extent to which the materials prepare students for the intermediate level, as cited in the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL's) proficiency guidelines. The lexical items in the four books are compared with each other and to two independently developed vocabulary lists from European sources, with the analysis limited to lexical items relating to some of the topics mentioned in the ACTFL guidelines, broadly categorized as personal data (talking about daily routine, and about family residence), education (talking about school and university), and leisure time activities (talking about activities, hobbies, and sports). Results suggest that the vocabulary required to talk about the selected vocabulary areas is insufficiently represented in the four textbooks, and the textbooks' glossaries contain many vocabulary items not necessary for communication in everyday life. It is suggested that vocabulary is one of the criteria by which a language textbook should be evaluated for proficiency-oriented instruction. (MSE)

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10 Proficiency Orientation, Vocabulary, and Selected First-Year College German Textbooks

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Introduction

For the past few years, intense discussion and debate in many publications have centered on the ACTFL proficiency guidelines (*ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*, 1; Bachmann and Savignon, 3; Byrnes, 5; Kramsch, 13; Schulz, 15; and the special issue of the *ADFL Bulletin*, 2). Attention has been drawn not only to the issue of testing, but to the impact the guidelines have on curriculum and instruction. Magnan (14) provides a good summary of the literature pertaining to the implications of proficiency for teaching and gives an overview of various initiatives aimed at translating the guidelines into course objectives. The discussion surrounding the guidelines demonstrates that proficiency-oriented instruction is a key phrase in current foreign language teaching and will continue to be so for some time to some.

But if the guidelines are to be considered an aid in the development of curricula and course content, then the question immediately arises whether current textbooks are compatible with such an orientation in teaching. This question applies not only to textbooks for intermediate

and advanced level instruction, but to textbooks for first-year instruction as well, for it is at this level that the basis for the development of proficiency is laid. This article therefore examines four recent college textbooks for first-year instruction in German on the basis of the question: "To what extent do these books prepare foreign language students in their first step toward the requirements for the intermediate level as cited in the ACTFL guidelines?" The first-year textbooks under examination are: *Deutsch natürlich* (6), *Deutsche Sprache und Landeskunde* (8), *Sprechen wir Deutsch* (7), and *Deutsch: Schritt für Schritt* (11).

The article limits its analysis to the lexical content of the textbooks with respect to some of the topic areas mentioned in the ACTFL guidelines. Even though preparation to fulfill the requirements of the oral proficiency interview stretches well beyond the area of lexis, we wish nevertheless to focus on vocabulary because in recent years the teaching of vocabulary has not found the recognition it deserves in instruction. Vocabulary does not seem to have been shorted quantitatively. I have observed that teachers spend a great deal of time and energy explaining new words, and students set up long vocabulary lists with words they barely have an opportunity to use in practice. The problem is not, I believe, as Gairns and Redman (10) stress, that too little vocabulary is taught. Rather, the vocabulary taught has not been chosen according to the criterion of usefulness. It is a random result of the classroom material. There seems to be the widespread assumption that all words introduced in class are automatically those which are necessary and useful for the learners.

Background for the Analysis of Lexical Content

The topic areas mentioned in the ACTFL generic descriptions for speaking for intermediate-mid and intermediate-low ratings relate to everyday, basic communication. The rating for intermediate-low stipulates that the learner "can perform such tasks as introducing self, ordering a meal, asking directions, and making purchases." For the next higher level, intermediate-mid, the following topics are mentioned: "can talk simply about self and family members . . . and participate in

simple conversations on topics beyond the most immediate needs; e.g., personal history and leisure time activities" (1).

The four German textbooks also name communication in everyday situations as a course objective, but the archaisms, nonwords, or neologisms found in the books, as well as the many words unrelated to real use or communicative need, necessitate a more systematic analysis of the lexical content. In order to perform such an analysis by computer, only those entries listed in the glossary of the respective textbooks were recorded, and semantic polyvalences were not taken into account (for example, the entry *Karte* has the possible meanings "ticket," "menu," "postcard" or "map"). Since with polyvalent entries one textbook might provide a different meaning or meanings than another book, an exact accounting of the meaning(s) of polyvalent entries would have made the analysis much more difficult, and—considering the task at hand—would have complicated it unnecessarily.

The first striking difference among the textbooks being considered is the varying amount of vocabulary presented in the glossaries. *Deutsch natürlich* (DN), with 4,144 entries, has the most extensive list, and *Deutsch: Schritt für Schritt* (DSS) contains the shortest, with 2,029 entries. *Deutsche Sprache und Landeskunde* (DSL), with 2,664 entries, and *Sprechen wir Deutsch* (SWD), with 3,219 entries, fall in the middle.

To determine the extent to which the four textbooks overlap in lexical content, it is necessary to tally for each of them how many items appear in that list alone and in no other: DN has 1,567 entries (out of 4,144) not found in the other lists: DSS has 393 (out of 2,029); DSL has 605 (out of 2,664); and SWD has 1,013 (out of 3,219). It seems, therefore, that the textbooks exhibit noteworthy differences in their lexical content.

In order to investigate to what extent each textbook fulfills its claim to focus on communication, we require a criterion for comparison, i.e., a vocabulary list that contains the lexical items necessary for communication in everyday situations and that is unrelated to the textbooks being studied. There are a number of vocabulary lists for German that are based on frequency counts, but these are not specifically oriented toward communication in everyday situations and cannot be used for the comparison of textbooks envisioned here. Two criterion-referenced

lists, however, from European sources may be used as a more appropriate basis for comparison: *Kontaktschwelle Deutsch als Fremdsprache* (4) and *Das Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache* (9). The lists are part of curricula developed by the Council of Europe and the German Adult Education Association, respectively. These vocabulary lists are independent of frequency studies and attempt to include the vocabulary necessary for everyday communication. The two institutions employed similar methods to construct their curricula. First they defined the communicative needs of the target group. Then they determined which speech acts the learners should be able to perform and which topics they should be able to handle orally. The lexical items necessary for communication within those speech acts and topics formed the basis of the lists. In the case of *Kontaktschwelle* a distinction was made as to which vocabulary was to be mastered productively and which only receptively. The choice of lexical items in both curricula is, of course, to a certain degree subjective, since it does not rest on frequency counts, but instead was reached by a consensus of experts. However, the consensus of the group helps to make objective the subjective decision of each individual. In addition, the definition of the learning objectives in both curricula explicitly refers to communication in everyday situations and therefore matches the topics stated in the ACTFL guidelines and agrees with the goals of the textbooks.

Analysis of the Vocabulary in the Textbooks

The analysis of the vocabulary of the four textbooks will be limited to those lexical items that relate to some of the topics mentioned in the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*. The following topics were chosen: personal data (information about self/others, daily routine, family, and residence); education (school and university); and leisure time (activities, hobbies, sports). Then the lexical items relevant to these topics were extracted from the vocabulary lists of *Kontaktschwelle* and *Zertifikat* , and this list was compared with the vocabulary lists of the textbooks. In this comparison, adjectives derived from nouns, as well as verbs in their reflexive and nonreflexive forms, were counted as separate entries, e.g.,

Verwandte (relative) and *verwandt* (related); *vorbereiten* (to prepare) and *sich vorbereiten* (to get ready/to prepare oneself).

The following entries (arranged according to topic) appear in the two basic vocabulary lists and in the lists of all four textbooks:

1. **Personal data. Talking about self/others and daily routine.** Supper, similar(ly), alone/only, old, to begin, to work, to get up, to look, car, bus, fat/thick, own, to drive, bicycle, woman, friend, breakfast, birthday, face, big/large, hair, housewife, to be called, young people, young, boy, small/little, to live, girl, man, lunch, to like, in the morning(s), tired, neighbor, name, nice, person, to sleep, beautiful, streetcar, week, weekend, typical, subway, married, future.[1]

   Talking about family and residence (house/room). Bathroom, balcony, bed, picture, brother, village, parents, family, window, garden, to like, comfortable, big/large, grandparents, house, child, small/little, country, landscape/scenery, to rent, modern, mother, vicinity, uncle, practical, bedroom, beautiful/nice, cupboard/closet, desk, sister, son, city, street, aunt, table, daughter, father, far, to live, apartment, living room, center/downtown, room.[2]
2. **Education. Talking about school and university.** To begin, to work, article, assignment, to describe, to go to, to discuss, to explain, to tell, subject/major, glad(ly), story/history, elementary school, good/well, high school, notebook, interesting, to have an interest in, to learn, to read, mathematics, professor, test/exam, to write, school, pupil, difficult, language, to speak, student, to study, system, university, to understand.[3]
3. **Leisure time. Talking about leisure-time activities, hobbies, sports.** Library, book, to watch TV, television, free time, to invite, party, film, soccer, comfortable, to listen to, movie theater, bar, concert, culture, art, to read, to paint, team, museum, music, program, radio, (phonograph) record, to swim, to see, to sing, to be fun, to go for a walk, game, to play, theater, to hike, magazine, newspaper.[4]

Concerning the remaining topically specific lexical items, the textbooks vary considerably, the vocabulary in *Deutsch natürlich* corresponding most frequently with the list from *Kontaktschwelle* and *Zertifikat*. Thus, one will find the following entries in DN and in none of the other textbooks: to change, to relax/to rest, to bathe/to swim, bathtub, college diploma, stupid/dopey, to take a shower, to recover, record player, belongings, mother-in-law, father-in-law, fight/quarrel, lesson, things.[5]

On the other hand, this fairly close correspondence between DN and the two basic vocabulary lists is hardly surprising, for the vocabulary list of DN is almost twice as long as the lists from *Kontaktschwelle* or *Zertifikat*. What is, perhaps, more astonishing is that the following words are absent in DN: address, at first, bath/bathroom, to be working, blond, bookshop, date, shower, married couple, elegant(ly), narrow/close, adult, last name, hallway, photo, camera, soccer field, hall/corridor, building, brothers and sisters, usual(ly), at home, to be from, to get information/to find out, cassette player, rented apartment, furniture, near/close by, ground floor, swimming pool, stadium, floor, paperback, terrace, tape, tape recorder, to translate, to prepare oneself, first name, weekday, dictionary, report card/grade report.[6] It must be stated, however, that these entries are not only absent in *Deutsch natürlich*; many are also not listed in the other three textbooks.

Table 1 demonstrates, using a few of the entries, just how much the four textbooks differ in including or not including entries from *Kontaktschwelle* and *Zertifikat*. This will only be shown with a few examples, since the number of topically specific lexical items found in the two basic vocabulary lists but not in all four textbooks totals 198 words.

Table 1
Distribution of Lexical Items in the Four Textbooks

	DN	*DSL*	*SWD*	*DSS*
abends (in the evening[s])	+	+	–	+
Adresse (address)	–	+	+	–
angenehm (pleasant)	+	+	+	–
anstrengend (strenuous)	+	–	+	–
Arbeit (test/term paper)	+	–	+	–
außerhalb (outside of)	+	+	–	–
bequem (comfortable)	+	–	+	+
bestehen (to pass an exam)	+	–	–	+
dumm (dumb/stupid)	+	+	–	–
Erdgeschoß (ground floor)	+	+	–	–
Erwachsene(r) (adult)	–	+	–	–
Examen (examination)	+	+	+	–
fleißig (hard working)	+	+	+	–
fotographieren (to photograph)	+	–	–	+
frühstücken (to have breakfast)	+	–	–	+
gern haben (to like)	+	–	+	–
herkommen (to be/come from)	–	+	–	–
Hobby (hobby)	+	–	+	+
hübsch (pretty)	+	+	–	+

Conclusion

In all, it can be said that the vocabulary required to talk about the selected topic areas is often insufficiently taken into account in the four textbooks. DN provides a larger proportion of vocabulary given in the basic lists for the selected topics, but the volume of its vocabulary (4,144 entries in a textbook for the first year!) creates problems of another sort. The teacher must differentiate between the vocabulary that should be actively controlled and that which needs only to be understood when listening or reading. The textbook fails to give the necessary help as to how this differentiation should be made.

If one looks beyond the selected topics areas and compares the total vocabulary in *Kontaktschwelle* and *Zertifikat* with the glossaries of the three other textbooks (DSL, SWD, and DSS), it becomes apparent that many words concerning everyday life are absent in these textbooks; the complete list of items not contained in the textbooks totals 734 words. On the other hand, the three textbooks list a series of entries that are not very helpful from the standpoint of communication in everyday life; for example: DS includes *Apfelschuß* (apple shoot) while *Apfelbaum* (apple

tree) is absent, or *Badeinsel* (island resort) but not *Badewanne* (bath tub). SWD includes *Autofreiheit* (freedom from cars), while *Automat* (coin-operated machine) is absent; it has *Bürgermedaille* (citizens' medal) but not *Bürgersteig* (sidewalk). DSS lists *Brieftaube* (homing pigeon) but not *Briefkasten* (mailbox), and *fernfahren* (long-distance driving) but not *Ferngespräch* (long-distance call). These are only a few examples, and the list of lexical items presented in the glossaries not appropriate for communication in everyday situations could be continued for each of the textbooks. Of course, the lexical content is not the only criterion by which we should evaluate a textbook, but it is an important factor in textbooks designed for proficiency-oriented instruction.

Notes

1. Talking about self/others and daily routine: Abendessen, ähnlich, allein, alt, anfangen, arbeiten, aufstehen, aussehen, Auto, beginnen, Bus, dick, eigen-, fahren, Fahrrad, Frau, Freund/-in, Frühstück, Geburtstag, Gesicht, groß, Haare, Hausfrau, heißen, Jugendliche, jung, Junge, klein, leben, Mädchen, Mann, Mittagessen, mögen, morgens, müde, Nachbar/-in, Name, nett, Person, schlafen, schön, Straßenbahn, Woche, Wochenende, typisch, U-Bahn, verheiratet, Zukunft.
2. Talking about family and residence (house/room): Badezimmer, Balkon, Bett, Bild, Bruder, Dorf, Eltern, Familie, Fenster, Garten, gefallen, gemütlich, groß, Großeltern, Haus, Kind, klein, Land, Landschaft, mieten, modern, Mutter, Nähe, Onkel, praktisch, Schlafzimmer, schön, Schrank, Schreibtisch, Schwester, Sohn, Stadt, Straße, Tante, Tisch, Tochter, Vater, weit, wohnen, Wohnung, Wohnzimmer, Zentrum, Zimmer.
3. Talking about school and university: anfangen, arbeiten, Artikel, Aufgabe, beschreiben, besuchen, diskutieren, erklären, erzählen, Fach, gern, Geschichte, Grundschule, gut, Gymnasium, Heft, interessant, sich interessieren, lernen, lesen, Mathematik, Professor, Prüfung, schreiben, Schule, Schüler/-in, schwer, schwierig, Sprache, sprechen, Student/-in, studieren, System, Universität, verstehen.
4. Talking about leisure-time activities, hobbies, sports: Bibliothek, Buch, fernsehen, Fernseher, Freizeit, einladen, Fest, Film, Fußball, gemütlich, hören, Kino, Kneipe, Konzert, Kultur, Kunst, lesen, malen, Mannschaft, Museum, Musik, Party, Programm, Radio, Schallplatte, schwimmen, sehen, singen, Spaß machen, spazieren gehen, Spiel, spielen, Theater, wandern, Woche, Wochenende, Zeitschrift, Zeitung.
5. Entries in DN (and not in the other textbooks): sich ändern, sich ausruhen, baden, Badewanne, Diplom, doof, duschen, sich erholen, Illustrierte, Plattenspieler, Sachen, Schwieger-, Streit, Stunde, Zeug.
6. Entries not found in DN: Adresse, am/zu Anfang, Bad, berufstätig, blond, Bücherei, Buchhandlung, Datum, Dusche, Ehepaar, elegant, eng, Erwachsene(r), Familienname, Flur, Foto, Fotoapparat, Fußballplatz, Gang, Gebäude, Geschwister, gewöhnlich, zu Hause, herkommen, sich informieren, Kassette, Kassettenrecorder, Mietwohnung, Möbel, nah, Parterre, Schwimmbad, Sportplatz, Stock, Taschenbuch, Terrasse, Tonband, Tonbandgerät, übersetzen, sich vorbereiten, Vorname, Wochentag, Wörterbuch, Zeugnis.

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